Backstory: The Trouble with Empathy

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Chung, Christina. Artwork for "The End of Empathy," *Invisibilia*. 2019.

"This concatenated belief is now everywhere: art encourages empathy and empathy will save us all."
Namwali Serpell, "The Banality of Empathy," The New York Review of Books

In a bristly moment of Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, Emily tells her friend Teresa, "Well I feel like all I'm asking for, all I'm ASKING for, is just a bigger dose of empathy–," to which Teresa retorts, "Oh don't with the empathy. Liberals are empathy addicts. Empathy empathy empathy. Empathy is *empty*."

Emily and Teresa aren't the only people who disagree about the value of empathy. Played out in casual conversations between friends, in political debates on the national stage, and in the philosophical thinking of Adam Smith, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt, the arguments both for and against provoke questions without easy answers. Empathy may be a potent force for understanding, but can it be liberally applied in all cases? Empathy may be empty, as Teresa says, but do we lose too much if we forgo it completely?

"As Obama would go on to tell *The New York Times*, good books – like good plays – give us the time and space to sit with ideas that might move us or unsettle us, in both cases stirring something new."

One of its greatest champions, Barack Obama, has never wavered over its importance. In *The Audacity of Hope*, a memoir from his time as the Senator from Illinois, Obama described empathy as the "heart" of his moral code, a "guidepost" for his politics, and a "call to find common ground" from which no one could be exempt. A decade later, in his farewell address, Obama urged the nation to prevail over its divisions and discriminations through good-faith acts of empathy: "If our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, each one of us must try to heed the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'" As Obama would go on to tell *The New York Times*, good books – like good plays – give us the time and space to sit with ideas that might move us or unsettle us, in both cases stirring something new. So, with the everyday ethics of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* fresh in mind, Obama proceeded to practice the very empathy he preached. But he chose to extend his compassion to a rather unlikely party: neither the downtrodden nor the underprivileged but, instead, a person whose power is rarely contested. For Obama, it wasn't just white Americans who needed to acknowledge the cruel histories and legacies of racism – it was non-white Americans who needed to have understanding, he

said, for "the middle-aged white man who from the outside may seem like he's got all the advantages, but who's seen his world upended by economic, cultural, and technological change." Though careful not to flatten the distinctions between both sides of a fast-deepening racial divide, Obama implored the American public to see through its differences by seeing through different eyes. The discovery of common ground – and the future of the nation – would depend on it.

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Despite its promises of a harmony founded upon affinity, or perhaps because of them, empathy has come under increasing criticism in recent years. According to Paul Bloom, a psychology professor at Yale, empathy works like a spotlight, brightly (and biasedly) illuminating the suffering of specific individuals but leaving everything else unlit. In his 2016 book *Against Empathy*, Bloom quotes the economist Thomas Schelling, who in 1968 wrote, "Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths – not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks." As Bloom demonstrates, empathy is more easily seduced by portraits of distress than by faceless facts and figures.

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As one of our most beloved companions at the museum, the library, and especially the theater, empathy is hard to shake. But a host of other scholars, scientists, authors, and journalists have also begun to think through its flaws and failures. While the liberatory potential of empathy cannot be denied, it can certainly be overstated, because, as research shows:

It's voyeuristic: my empathy requires the exposure of your suffering.

It's invasive: my empathy requires access to your private realm of feeling.

It's appropriative: your feelings become mine.

It's narcissistic: my empathy is really just a loose projection of my own feelings onto yours.

It's self-congratulatory: my empathy is proof of my great virtue.

It's palliative: now that you have my empathy, has your suffering been relieved?

It's lazy: now that you have my empathy, what else could I possibly do to help?

It's unfair: though I am the cause of your pain, you ought to empathize with me just as I am asked to empathize with you.

It's cowardly: though I say to you, "I feel your pain," I remain a safe distance from the actual circumstances of your hurt.

It's elitist: my empathy is my privilege because I might never face the misfortune of your circumstance.

It's condescending: my empathy amounts to a form of charity because I do it for you.

It's profitable: my ability to show empathy has won me patrons, promotions, and prestige.

It's impossible: how, after all, could I ever really know what you feel?

Some of its detractors have gone so far as to advise its abandonment altogether. This past April, the NPR podcast *Invisibilia* aired an episode called "The End of Empathy," an impassioned reckoning with the series' very premise: "The *Invisibilia* way is the empathetic way," says host Hanna Rosin. But, she goes on, "in the post-#MeToo, vigilant, polarized Trump-era world, showing empathy for your so-called enemies is practically taboo." This episode asks whether incels – a community of young men who identify as "involuntarily celibate," and among whom misogyny spreads like gangrene – deserve any empathy at all. Since the 2000s, incels have shown empathy exclusively to one another, commiserating over what feels to them like relentless romantic rejection and unpardonable sexual humiliation, and channeling their deep-seated entitlement and virulent self-loathing into rage and even violence. As a rule, the *Invisibilia* journalists try to practice empathy in all cases. But here, they discover an exception to that rule. As the episode ends, they join what Rosin calls the "no-empathy-for-the-enemy camp." For some, this conclusion is righteously radical – a reasonable reaction to injustice – while others, however leery of empathizing with incels, might rankle at the episode's invitation to build walls against our "so-called enemies." The *Invisibilia* journalists are keen to stake out this new position, but the ground is far from smooth.

> "For all its rosebuds, empathy is rife with thorns – and it is on these thorns that Will asks us to dwell."

For all its rosebuds, empathy is rife with thorns – and it is on these thorns that Will asks us to dwell. *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* shows us people who practice empathy, for better or for worse, and it also, simply by showing us people, moves us to have empathy for them, though we might ask ourselves: for better, or for worse? In the epigraph to this essay, Namwali Serpell pushes back against two premises: the premise that art elicits empathy, and the premise that empathy is a good thing. She has a problem with the logic that more art means more empathy means an abundance of good things. For her, this idea is "concatenated" – meaning linked, as if in a chain or series – because art and empathy and goodness are often tied together without a second thought. But second thoughts are due, she suggests, even overdue. Will, who brings up Serpell's piece in his Playwright's Perspective, seems to agree.

> "Will's play returns, instead, to drama's earliest purpose in a functioning democracy, to ancient Greece, where the theater was a place of seeing."

According to Obama, empathy is the surest way to chart a course between the islands upon which the like-minded have found themselves stranded. With unrelenting precision and painstaking subtlety, Will grants us brief access to one such island, a refuge for Catholic conservatives feeling tempest-tossed in a culture less and less amenable to their yearnings. Yet *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* strays from Obama's tack, navigating the tides and eddies of contemporary politics by refusing to treat the stage solely as a vessel for empathy. Will's play returns, instead, to drama's earliest purpose in a functioning democracy, to ancient Greece, where the theater was a place of seeing. Greek citizens went to the *theatron* to see plays that tested their visions of governance and rituals of honor; and in the gentle arc of the amphitheater, they also saw each other. *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* asks whether there are alternatives to empathy; it asks whether there can be compassion but also conviction, recognition but also rectitude; it asks whether it's possible to look closely, and to listen carefully, without settling on the shores of a shared humanity. Perhaps it's possible to venture further, beyond the shallows of the shoreline, past the familiarity of fellow-feeling, to a place unknown; to a place of intractable values and irreconcilable positions; to a place of democratic confrontation so fierce, so vibrant, and so full of love as to be almost unthinkable.